

2014 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Thank you President Kelly, Provost Perry and distinguished faculty, students, honored guests and loved ones.

It is such an incredible honor to accept this award because it comes directly from our students, and it gives me a special pride to have been selected from such an illustrious group of faculty.

I would like to congratulate all of this year's winners as well as those who were nominated. I think we should all take a moment to recognize these individuals for their dedication and continued contributions to making this University the best that it can be.

As part of the selection process for this award, I met a panel of nine amazing student representatives from each one of our fine colleges. I was so impressed by their dedication, their curiosity, and their willingness to learn. It makes me swell with pride to know that FAU has produced these future leaders of the highest quality who can compete with anyone.

I also want to take this opportunity to give special thanks to my beautiful wife, Erin. She's tough, she's fearless, and she teaches me every day to overcome adversity. She also teaches me to live in the moment because, in her words, we will never be younger than we are right now. I love you, Erin. I also want to thank my parents who support me unconditionally and instilled in me the importance of education, family, and living a healthy lifestyle. My very talented brothers and sister who allow me to share in their great accomplishments in music, business, sports, and engineering. My little nephews who teach me to look at the world in wonder and cherish every new discovery. And my mentors and colleagues in the faculty like Diane Alperin, Jenny Peluso, Donna Chamley-Wiik, and so many others including those in the College of Engineering and Computer Science, especially everyone in my own Department of Civil, Environmental and Geomatics Engineering, like Pete Scarlatos and my current chairman and good friend Yan Yong.

Now I have to share with you a quick story. After I received the phone call from James Capp about this award, which started out, "I regret to inform you..." and then I got all disappointed, and then he finally let me know that I was the 2014 Distinguished Teacher of the Year, after which I started jumping up and down but silently because I was at the grocery store and somebody might see me. Then he started talking about giving a speech at the Honors Convocation, and naturally I was overjoyed and I would have said yes to anything at that point. But then after the euphoria died down, I realized that I had no idea what a convocation address should be about, so when I started writing this speech a couple of hours ago, I looked up the word "convocation" in my dictionary. "Con" as we all know means "against" (like pros and cons) and "vocation" means job or work, so I realized that this event is for students against jobs, so now I know why I am here.

Seriously, I am here to talk about some things that I consider critical to your journey beyond this place. First of all, I think FAU is the greatest institution in the world. One of my faculty colleagues asked me when I joined, "Why would you come here? This is not MIT or Stanford or one of those schools." And I said, you are right, we're not, but this is the place where you and I are at right now, and together with the most special ingredient – all of you (our amazing students and world class faculty), we can make it even better than all of those schools you just mentioned. So I believe in the greatness of you, and I believe in the greatness of FAU.

In the practice of yoga, we say the light in me honors the light in you. But there are a few secrets to allowing your inner light to shine as brightly as it should. One of those secrets is to "do what you love and love what you do."

This one is a bit complicated. How do you know if you like what you do enough to do it every day? Some people will just settle for doing what they are doing right now because it is easy or it pays the bills or it is prestigious or it's what's hot right now according to the latest fad or it's too late to do something else or I've already started down this path.

But you can't be a professional coffee drinker or take long walks on the beach forever.

You have to like your work more than any unproductive pleasure. You have to like what you do enough that you look forward doing it. If your life's work is not your favorite thing to do, you'll have terrible problems with procrastination. You'll have to force yourself to work, and when you resort to that, the results are distinctly inferior compared to what you are truly capable of.

Discover your talents. Set ambitious but attainable goals and relentlessly pursue them without compromising your integrity. Heed the call of duty. Put your heart into it. Be

beyond reproach. Be the “go to” person. Be a problem solver. Be confident. Be an ambassador for good. Be genuine. Be humble. Be compassionate. Be the best that you can be even when no one but you is watching. And be proud of yourself.

To be truly happy, you have to be doing something you not only enjoy, but you admire.

Everyone who knows me knows that I think this is my dream job, and every day when I come home from work, I whisper to myself, I can’t believe they pay me to do this because this is what I’ve always wanted to do with my life.

The next secret to eternal happiness is this: “Live to learn and you will learn to live.”

That is why I never left college in the first place. I am still a student of life, and I learn something new every day in the most unexpected ways. One of the things that makes FAU such a great destination right now is the Distinction Through Discovery Undergraduate Research Initiative. Imagine for a moment that you were at a different school. In your formative years, you take huge general studies classes taught by graduate student teaching assistants who barely know more than you do. But at FAU, you get to take introductory chemistry courses from a real-life environmental engineering faculty member and if you are curious enough and courageous enough, you can approach this person without fear and find out that he is working on groundbreaking new technologies to solve all of the world’s problems and he might even have an opening in his lab for you to work together with him on some really relevant research. That’s what I do. My lab and field research teams are composed of mostly undergraduate students. We talk about the science behind real-world problems that folks in the community have given FAU large sums of money to investigate. These fresh young minds ask questions that lead to new discoveries. This kind of learning is different from textbooks, quizzes and Google university. The learning that goes on in the classroom is just barely scratching the surface of the knowledge and experience gained working one-on-one with a world-class FAU faculty member in the lab. To the students who are afraid, I say don’t be. Approach your favorite faculty member and ask about his or her research. Watch them light up as they talk about their life’s work, and then ask to be a part of it. For the faculty members who are afraid that this kind of relationship will take too much time or wrongly ask, “What’s my incentive,” I tell you that I learn as much if not more from my student researchers than they do from me. When they question the theories that we have long held to be true but cannot be explained, this is when real innovation happens. I can’t tell you how many times a student has told me in class that “I can’t do this.” But in the lab, they realize its value and break down that barrier, shining a new light that expands the boundaries of knowledge.

Earlier this year, my student came to me after running an experiment and saying in embarrassment, "I think something went wrong," but then when we looked at the data together, we realized that the result was just unexpected (not wrong), and we have inadvertently opened a new door to discovery, which led to another grant and another publication. When the infectious wonder and curiosity lead to a breakthrough, we all learn something new and society is better for it. So get off your high horse and give as much of yourself as you can to undergraduate research. It will make you a better teacher, a better researcher, a better student, and a better person.

So what I'm saying is that students should not merely pay tuition just to sleep in class. And faculty should not be paid to just stand in front of the room and talk for an hour and 20 minutes. Let's expand the classroom and create opportunities for real learning through undergraduate research. Together we can make FAU the greatest institution in the world – just like I said when I first joined this place to start my dream job 11 years ago.

Faculty, students, staff, and family members... inspire each other, let the light in you shine brightly, and if we do it together, instead of being dim individual points of light we can amplify our brightness and illuminate the sky, so that our light will be seen much farther away than it is right now.

Live to learn, love what you do, and Go OWLs!